

word of the day by emmaofmisthaven

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Summary:

aftermath

noun, /'ɑːf.tə.mæθ/

the period that follows an unpleasant event or accident, and the effects that it causes

1. Exhausted

exhausted

adjective, /ɪɡˈzɔːstɪd/

extremely tired

El falls asleep against his neck before they even make it back to the surface, halfway through a hug. One moment she's sobbing and shivering, and the next a dead weight is against Hopper's shoulder and he's the one with the shiver running down his spine. This isn't the first time they embrace – there were too many nightmares at first and, psychic powers or not, she's still a damn kid. She needs a hug once in a while, and he's not against serving them.

Still, this moment feels different. More vulnerable. Because she's falling asleep in his arms and he pretends like he's not feeling anything, like he didn't have another little girl snoring against his neck before. This was then and that is now, and the situation is different. But. The same, also, in some fucked up way. Different little girl, same need to be comforted and taken care, same vulnerability. Same fucking love.

So he holds her up, shifting a bit so her legs are around his waist and his arm is under her thighs. She weights nothing, which is a bit worrying especially when he remembers all the crap food he's been feeding her for a year. He'll have to look into this, if he wants to do it right. Maybe he'll ask Joyce. Or Flo. Or even Karen, who's as clueless about her children's whereabouts as she is skilled at providing them with a healthy diet.

The thought alone makes his head spins.

Thankfully, he doesn't meet anyone on his way to the car, and so nobody comes to bother him while he lies El down before climbing behind the wheel. One radio call later has him know Joyce's kid is

fine, her oldest driving them back to their house. So that's where he's going to. Because Hopper knows better than to keep El away from her friends, almost passed out or not. He's kept her away from them long enough as it is.

And, lo and behold, the Wheeler kid is already outside before Hopper even has time to kill the ignition. He looks pale and weary, but that's probably just the lack of light. Also, there is dust all over the upper half of his face except for two circles around his eyes, and a bandana tied around his neck, and Hopper wonders when exactly he lost his authority on kids. It was not supposed to happen so soon, or ever.

He ignores the kid long enough to walk around the car, open the other door and takes El in his arms. She's still passed out to the world, poor thing, snoring a little as she snuggles against his neck. Not that Hopper has time to react to that particular development in their relationship when he turns around and the Wheeler kid is just there. Staring.

Other thing Hopped definitely didn't want to think about.

Boys.

Around El.

No thanks.

Hopper doesn't move. The kid doesn't move. Hopper sighs. "Problem, kid?"

He makes some vague gesture, as if wanting to convey the fact that he wants to hold El without having to use words, which. Impressive. And also, very much not. Hopper stands his ground, waiting – he has all the time in the world, and it's been a weird couple of days. Making a teenage boy squirm is a nice break from this shit show he now calls his life.

The kid squirms a little bit more, and vaguely raises his arms. "I can take her."

Hopper doesn't even have to raise an eyebrow for the kid to give up, cheeks red, eyes refusing to meet his. He forces himself not to smile,

because there is nothing enjoyable about winning against a kid, technically. Still, his steps are a bit lighter as he makes his way inside.

The house still looks like Joyce went batshit crazy on it – just when they were done fixing it from last year, damn it – but at least she cleared the couch so he can drop El on it. Nancy is already by his side with a blanket, bless her older more mature Wheeler heart, and she tucks El in like she’s done it all her life. Which. He suddenly remembers Wheeler number three, and it makes sense.

“Coffee?” Joyce asks, her voice wavering a little. He wants to hug her until all her pieces are back together, but that would be wrong. She was still Bob’s girl a few hours ago. She will always be someone else’s girl, and he’ll only ever be the one who gives her cigarettes and support and everything else.

“Fuck yes. Please.”

Which is how he finds himself sitting around her tiny table in her tiny kitchen, with Nancy and Jonathan and the Harrington kid. Should he talk about the bat and nails thing? About how Nancy can use a gun? About everything? Or should he just put it aside with everything else, not question it the way he doesn’t question El’s powers or Will’s thing or why it’s been all of them, together, all over again.

They all share what happened after he drove away from the house, and it takes all of Hopper’s will not to lecture the Harrington kid here and there. He looks rightfully chastised anyway, like he knows he did wrong but also did right by the kids, protecting them and everything. There is no win-win scenario in their story anyway. Just everyone trying their best with what little they got, and a book of board games, and a psychic girl. Whatever.

The coffee only helps in making Hopper more on edge, so he gives up after three sips. Joyce is smoking cigarettes after cigarette, her leg bouncing to a fast rhythm that goes with the madness in her eyes. He wonders if she’s finally about to break. He knows better than to underestimate her strength.

It takes about half an hour before Hopper notices how quiet the rest of the house is, and to investigate. The last thing he wants is for the kids to be planning even more trouble at two in the morning. He would have just enough patience to throw them all into a cell back at the station and call it a day, really.

But when he goes back to the living room, it's to find them all piled up into a big teenager mess, fast asleep. El is still lying on the couch, except now the Wheeler kid is sitting there too, with her head in his lap. Because of course. Damn it. The kid with the baseball cap is sitting on the floor, his back to the couch, snoring loudly, while the Sinclair boy is lying down on the floor, with the new girl tucked against his side. A mess, and they're not even fully hormonal yet.

"Cute," Jonathan whispers.

"Take a picture," Steve prompts, elbowing the other boy.

There's a moment of something Hopper doesn't care about between them, before Jonathan shrugs and goes to grab his camera. Nancy is smiling while he takes the picture, and so is Joyce, even if it doesn't quite reach her eyes. Not yet. But soon, soon she will be happy again. At least he hopes so.

Obviously, it is quickly decided that they can't leave the kids like this, if only for the sake of their backs. Nancy agrees to drive her brother and the Sinclair kid home, Steve takes care of the other boy, and Joyce decides to keep the girl if only because nobody exactly knows where she lives. It leaves Hopper with El, the way he likes it, and soon they're back in the car and back to the cabin. The place is even more of a mess than he remembers, like he left it be for two decades instead of two days. But El's bed is still in his room and he's slept on worse than a couch before and whatever else happens, they will deal with it tomorrow. Or the day after.

"Very tired," she mumbles when he puts her in her bed, snuggling under her blanket.

"Exhausted," he replies softly. His knuckles brush against her cheek; he has no idea what he would have done with himself if she hadn't made it tonight.

“Hausted. Good word.”

His laugh is small and breathy. Damn the kid. “Yeah. Your word for the day.”

“Good. Exhausted.” She sighs. “Good.”

Good, indeed.

2. Stunt

stunt

noun /stʌnt/

something that is done to get attention for the person or people responsible for it

Life goes back to normal the following day.

‘Normal’ for Eleven being a week of sleeping as much as she can to recover from her fight with the shadow monster, then realising that Hopper doesn’t have plans to let her out of the cabin any time soon. She should have expected it, really, but her taste of freedom has her even more restless than before. Hopper hides her in the back of his car once, on a Saturday evening, so they can have dinner at the Byers’, but it’s not enough. Because it’s dark outside, and it’s just four different walls, and Mike isn’t here. She officially meets Will, and he’s a nice friend, but he’s not Mike. She wants Mike.

Joyce gets the idea into her head that she might eventually be able to go to school with the boys, when everything finally settles down, and that keeps Eleven going. She starts a routine of sorts, to keep herself busy during the days when Hopper is working. The mornings are dedicated to cleaning the cabin, because it’s still a mess after her last tantrum and Will’s fight with the monster, and she wants it neat and pretty. In the afternoons, she teaches herself to read more. Will gives her a few books, and Hopper brings more from the library, and it’s difficult at first. Papa taught her her letters when she was a little girl – she remembers, if only vaguely, those lessons with Kali, reading from colourful books about animals and nature they’d never seen with their own eyes.

Everything is a little bit more difficult now, because there are so many words she doesn’t know. She’s taken to writing them down in a notebook, and asking Hopper at night. It’s a slow process, but she

manages to finish her first book in a week and to understand most of the story. It's a book for babies, but it's a start.

It is one such day, Eleven frowning at the concept of a magic chocolate factory, when she gets startled by a knock at the door. Her eyes jump to the clock on the wall. Two-three-seven. Too early for Hopper to be home, and it's not even his secret knock. A shiver runs down her spine as she stands up and, silent as a mouse, moves closer to the door. She presses herself with her back to the wall, and raises one hand. Her powers surge up her arm and into her fingers, at the ready. When the knocking comes again, she is waiting for it, and she stills.

She is about to attack, to slam the door open and slam the visitor away from her, when a familiar voice rises. "El? El, it's me!" Just loud enough to be heard through the door, but not too loud that it would attract attention in the forest.

Eleven's heart drops in her chest, relief and happiness all at once. "Mike?" she asks.

A soft 'thump' against the door has her guessing Mike just pressed his hand to it, and she can hear the smile in his voice when he replies, "Yeah, it's me. Let me in. Nobody followed me, I promise, we're safe."

She's smiling too by the time she unbolts the door and opens it. It's been two weeks, but her chest still rises at the sight of him. He's exactly like she remembers – hair falling in front of his eyes, freckles all over his nose, crooked smile – but also so different. He's taller than her now, looking down to meet her eyes, all skinny long legs and awkward stance. His voice is the weirdest, though, way deeper than she remembers. It doesn't sound like him, but it also does. It's the most confusing thing.

"Hey," he says softly as a way of greeting.

She answers by throwing herself in his arms, and he loses his balance, has to take a step back so they don't fall. His arms are around her, holding her tight until she can feel his heart beating – or maybe it's hers. She's not sure. What she is sure, though, is that he kisses the

side of her head, and her cheeks get warmer. She's missed him so much it's actually painful, an ache beneath her breastbone.

He's still smiling when she steps away from the hug, his eyes racking her face before he frowns. Eleven wonders what she has done wrong – was she not supposed to hug him? Maybe he doesn't like her like this anymore? Maybe he likes Max. Maybe he likes another girl. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

But then he's pulling at one of her curls, with wonder in his eyes, and Eleven gasps. Hopper plays with her hair all the time, ruffling it like it's nobody's business, but this is different. She doesn't feel like recoiling from it, or pushing Mike away. Not when he's looking at her like this, like nothing else matters in the world.

"It's so curly," he comments, pulling once more – her hair is growing so long these days, even if you don't always notice when it's like this.

"You like it?" she asks, small and tentative. Kali had brushed it off her face, until it was smooth and slick, but it went away after a shower. Now it's back to being a mess, and to Eleven sighing a lot when she combs it. Much to Hopper's entertainment, and to her own frustration. She doesn't want to cut it off, because she wants it like Nancy or the women on tv, soft and pretty, but she has no idea how to do it.

"Yeah, it's – it looks great." His entire face turns red, before he adds, "Everything looks great on you."

Eleven presses her lips into a tight line not to grin too much. Joyce had told her that she looked 'very lovely, sweetheart,' but it's not the same. It's not the same, coming from Mike. More important. More meaningful.

They stand there, grinning and blushing, for a moment longer, before Eleven remembers her manners. Or, at least, remembers how women on tv act when someone shows up at their door. Which, close enough, right? So she claps her hands and moves to the kitchen, looking back at Mike as she goes. He seems confused, and she grins. "Do you want a drink?"

He blinks, once, before his smile is back. “Just water is good.”

“Just water,” she nods and grabs two glasses. The faucet groans when she opens it, trembling a little. She closes it with difficulty, before she turns to Mike once more and offers him the drink. “How did you know where I am?”

His smile is a little more of something else when he replies, “I blackmailed Nancy into telling me. And Lucas made a scene at the arcade to keep Chief Hopper away for a while. I owe him one.”

Eleven blinks – so many words she doesn’t know, but she gets most of what Mike is saying. At least she thinks so. It’s always hard to tell. “Just to see me?”

“Yeah, of course!” He takes a step closer. “I wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m okay.” Her voice is small, disappointment like a rock in her belly. Is he only checking to make sure she’s okay? Nothing else? “I was reading.”

His eyes light up, even more so when he notices the book on the couch next to the blanket she uses to keep warm. He goes to plop on the couch and grabs the book. “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory! I love it!”

She moves to sit next to him, mind too confused to think of anything to say. Not that Mike seems to mind all that much, opening the book where Eleven stopped and clearing his throat. Before she even has time to understand what is going on, he starts reading out loud, with funny voices for the characters and everything. It makes her smile, and laugh, and soon she’s relaxing again.

They make it through three chapters before Mike kicks off his sneakers and puts his feet on the coffee table, and Eleven puts her feet on his knees. She’s half-lying on the couch by the end of the following chapter, Mike’s hand on her ankle. That is how Hopper finds them – the clock reads four-two-four, earlier than when he usually comes home. He takes one look at the scene in front of him, and Mike is still as a rock next to her, and Hopper sighs loudly.

“Yeah, should have guessed,” he grumbles. “You’re wasting my time, kid.”

“I just –” Mike starts, sputtering.

“Yeah, yeah, I don’t care. Know how much paperwork I’ll have to do because of your little stunt?”

Mike blushes, but it’s not like before, it’s not the same kind of red when he’s talking to Eleven. “Sorry, okay?”

Hopper rolls his eyes and sighs, before he gets rid of his jacket. He’s not even looking at them when he says, “How ‘bout you call me next time? Make sure nobody follows you here or anything.”

Mike is about to argue, the way Eleven always argues with Hopper when he says something she doesn’t like, but then he sighs and gives up. He also moves his hand from her ankle, which. She wishes he hadn’t. “Yes, sir.”

Hopper takes off his belt next, and puts it on a shelf too high for Eleven to reach. When he turns around, it’s with his hands on his hips and his eyes on Eleven. “Let’s start with once a week, okay, kiddo? He can come every Saturday.”

She blinks, then grins. “Dustin and Lucas too.”

“And Will and Max,” Mike adds.

Eleven wants to tell him Max isn’t welcomed, but Hopper speaks first. “Fine.” Then, under his breath, “Never signed up for this...”

But Mike is grinning and his hand squeezes her knee, and Eleven forgets all about Hopper, and how Max isn’t her friend, and everything else. Only Mike’s smile is important, and the fact that she will see him every week. It’s not much, but it’s a first.

“Compromise,” she says.

Hopper smiles, just a little.

3. Honest

honest

adjective /'ɒn.ɪst/

telling the truth or able to be trusted and not likely to steal, cheat, or lie

Here is the thing.

Hopper knows he fucked up when it comes to the kid. The Wheeler boy may have taught her a bad habit or two (or twenty) but his lesson on lying was a good one. So, yeah, Hopper shouldn't have lied to her. Or break his promise. His mistake, okay. He wasn't exactly ready to jump back into fatherhood, not after Sarah, not after everything. Especially not with the kind of kid Eleven is. (One of a kind.)

Still, if he's going to do this – properly, this time – he needs to do it well. Which involves some self-reflection, and. Let's just say he's not too great at those. Okay, he sucks at those. But he's trying to improve and, yeah, that has to count for something.

So the leading her on and making promises he can't keep?

Yeah, let's just say he needs to cut those. Like, immediately.

She's already getting restless from too much cabin fever, and he doesn't want a Chicago, round two. Round one was already too painful as it is. Not to mention she still won't talk about what happened. It drives him bonkers. Just a little. A fucking lot.

He sits her down after breakfast, smudges of chocolate around her mouth and hair in front of her eyes. He asked if she wanted to cut it, just a fringe, but she refused. Even started crying. He knows better than to address the issue again. Instead, he got her new clothes and – well, Joyce and that Nancy girl got her new clothes. Bless the women

in his life. Thanks to them, now the girl has age-appropriate style-appropriate clothes, even if she still favours flannel and jeans. It suits her, more than the punk style.

“Okay, kid. Let’s talk.”

She only shrugs, arms folded on her chest, but her eyes are sparkling, so she must guess it’s serious talk time. Good girl.

“We’re going to be honest about the situation, okay?”

“Honest?” she asks softly, with a frown.

He doesn’t sigh, because it’s not fair on her. But it does get tiring, having to explain so many words just so they can get a basic conversation going. “Yeah, honest. It’s never saying lies and never makes fake promises.”

That does get a reaction out of her. Those are words she lives by, after all. “You weren’t honest. Before.”

“No, I wasn’t,” he admits. Which, it’s the whole point of this conversation. “But we both need to get better at this, okay? Seems fair?”

She nods, and sits up a little. Good. Now they can get somewhere.

“You know all the times I said ‘soon’ before?” She nods again. “It wasn’t a lie, but it wasn’t the truth either. Because I didn’t know. And I still don’t know how long it’s going to take before you can go outside. Might be a month. Two months. We don’t know.”

Her features fall a little, not that he can blame her. All she wants is to go outside with that Wheeler kid and live her life, which Hopper doesn’t like for so many reasons. But he can’t keep her in forever. And he can’t decide when to let her out. Just thinking about it all gives him a fucking headache.

“Why?”

Such a simple question for such a complex answer.

“Because...” He stops and really thinks about it. About how to break it down so she can understand. Thankfully, Eleven is patient when she puts her mind to it, and she stares at him while he ponders on his next words. “Because right now, you’re like a ghost to a lot of people.”

“Like dead?”

“Like, you’re invisible. You don’t exist at all.” She pouts, but otherwise seems to get the concept. A fucking miracle. “And we need some special papers to make you a real person. So the bad men won’t come for you again. But it takes time, okay?”

She finally looks away, frowning even more so than before. Whatever she is thinking, she doesn’t voice it for a very long time. Didn’t she get it? Did he explain wrong? Does he have to try again in different words? Jesus, he didn’t miss that part of parenting. At all.

“Then I can be a real person in school?”

That does get a smile out of him. She must be the only kid in this town who actually wants to go to school. Go figure. “Yeah, and to the shops and everything. A really real person.”

“A really real person.” She grins. “I like it.”

“Bet you do, kiddo.”

She’s so happy at the prospect she almost forgets that they still have no idea how long it’ll take – Doc sure is taking his damn sweet time recovering from his leg injury and getting everything settled. It pains Hopper to have to remind her, but. No false hopes. Not this time.

“But remember. We don’t know how long it’ll take.” And he hates it, how the smile vanishes from her face. She needs to be smiling, always. “But in the meanwhile, we need to get you ready. So you can go to school with everyone else.”

And it’s back again, that dazzling smile of her.

Hopper loves her so much he can’t cope.

Still, with that in mind, they get settled into a routine of sorts. Of course, all the little shits she calls friends wanted to help her out, but having them at his house every Saturday is enough as it is already. Especially with all the crap they leave all around – card games and board games and any other bullshit game. It's like a damn toy store in his cabin now.

No, instead, he brings in the big guns. Nancy Wheeler is Hawkins High's sweetheart and the best in maths and science, so she will do just fine. She also brings some positive femininity into Eleven's life. God knows she ain't getting that from the little red spitfire she doesn't seem to particularly like.

Joyce's oldest agrees to help with English and history and, somewhere down the line, the Harrington kid finds himself enrolled for geography and political science. Which. What could possibly go wrong, right? Especially when they're fine being paid only a few bucks an hour or, as in Steve's case, with a good recommendation letter for university. Hopper can deal with that.

So it's agreed that Nancy will come on Mondays, Jonathan on Wednesdays and the Harrington boy on Fridays ("Not feeling like partying?" "If I get a hot date, you'll be the first to know, chief!"), and that Eleven will work on her own in between. And, if the progress in her vocabulary is anything to go by, Hopper sees progress after only a week or two.

Money well spent.

It is one such night, Hopper cranky from having to deal with whatever bullshit happens when you mix teenagers with alcohol, when he comes home to Eleven and the Harrington kid working. Or. Well. Not really. He comes home to the Harrington kid sleeping on his couch, mouth opened into a snore, and Eleven sitting with her feet in his lap and her nose in a National Geographic magazine. She looks up at him with a smile and her finger on her mouth in a shushing gesture and, not for the first time, Hopper tells himself he loves her so fucking damn much.

"Exhausted," she tells him softly, the single word more out of a need not to disturb the sleeping teenager than out of a lack of vocabulary

now.

Hopper makes a show of rolling his eyes, before he kicks the kid's feet off the coffee table. He doesn't take pleasure in the way the kid jumps off his skin, eyes wide. But, frankly, it's a close thing. "I don't pay you to sleep on the job."

He runs a hand through his hair, ruining it in the process. "You're not paying me at all."

And when did all those shits get so confident, seriously? "Get out of my house."

"Damn, geez, okay fine. Calm down, I'm going, I'm going." He stands up, all limbs and stupid hair, before he turns back to Eleven. It's almost hilarious, how he seems to master the hand-on-hips-and-pointy-finger thing. To the point where he could give Karen lessons. "You do your homework. Correctly this time."

"Damn, geez, okay fine," Eleven echoes, not looking up from her magazine.

Hopper laughs out loud.